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Nigeria's Political Economy: A Comparative Study of Civilian and Military Administrations Management of the Economy (1979 – 1983 and 1985 – 1993)

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Abstract

The study examined Nigeria's Political Economy:A Comparative study of civilian and military administrations management of the economy between 1980 -1983 and 1985 – 1993.The study is a comparative study between the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari's management of the economy and that of the military administration of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida regime. Documentary research was used to gather data for the study while logical inference and simple percentage was used for analysis. The theoretical framework used for the study is institutional economic theory. The study revealed amongst others that the military regime of General Babangida achieved better GDP economic growth for the country. It also revealed that the number of poor Nigerians grew higher during the Babangida military regime even though the GDP growth was better than that of the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari. The study also revealed more Nigerians were employed during the military administration of General Babangida. The study concludes by observing that despite the economic growth experienced during the military regime of General Babangida it did not reduce poverty amongst citizens. The study thus recommends that civil democracies should be protected and not allowed to collapse as they initiate policies that address poverty amongst the citizens as demonstrated by the democratic and civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari in Nigeria. Civilian democracies should be allowed to survive the tides and implement interventions in the political economy of their countries that would improve the lives of the citizens.

Key Words: Political Economy, Military regime, Poverty Index, Economic Growth, Unemployment.

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Introduction

In spite of the turbulence and shock the Nigerian economy is undergoing largely due to a protracted prosecution of a seemingly inexhaustible security challenge from 2015 and the total removal of fuel subsidy in 2023 it is ranked as the 53rd largest economy in the word in terms of GDP ,the six the largest in Africa and the 27th largest in terms of purchasing power parity and ranked 161 in the United Nations Development Index in 2019(Nigerian Consulate,2020;USAID,2025;KPMG,2015,UNDP,2020)

The Nigerian economy has been greatly impacted by the presence of the military in its governance for two decades and nine years out of its sixty four years of independence by 1st October, 2024.The civilian administration of Alh. Shehu Shagari (1979 -1983) and the military regimes of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (August 1985 – August 1993) have impacted the political economy of Nigeria in such magnitude that many decades after their exit from power the impact of their policies still reverberate in different sectors of the Nigerian economy.

Alhaji Shehu Shagari's civilian administration initiated a couple of policies from 1979 when it assumed power to facilitate progress in the political economy of Nigeria. One of the early initiatives of the administration was to develop the Fourth National Development Plan (1980 – 1985) whose major goal was to improve on the achievements of the third national development plan (1975 – 1980) which recorded a number of substantial successes. The third national development plan which the fourth national development succeeded was recorded to have performed well in reference to its spelt out objectives (Donald.Francis, and Christopher ,2020).

General Babangida introduced the Structural Adjustment Program as the driving policy for Nigeria's political economy in 1985 which led to several adjustments and reviews in the productive sectors of the Nigerian economy. The Structural Adjustment Program introduced several policies that shook the foundations of the Nigerian economy influencing subsequent economic growth, poverty index and unemployment rate in the country. To facilitate the administrations grip on the direction of the economy the administration introduced the rolling plan development era into Nigeria's Political economy lexicon. The rolling era development plan lasted from 1990 – 1998 (Okojie, 1992).

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to make a comparative analysis between civilian government and military government management of the country's political economy with special reference to the administrations of Alhaji Shehu Usman Shagari and General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. However the specific objectives of the study include:

1. To find out the level of economic growth in each of the administrations;

2. To identify the poverty index of the country in each of the administrations; and

3. To find out the unemployment rate in the country in each of the administrations.

Methodology

The study adopted documentary analysis for the collection and analysis of data. These include the use of textbooks, journals, government documents and other secondary sources of information.

Theoretical Framework

The institutional economic theory was adopted as theoretical framework for the study. The institutional economic framework emphasise the role of institutions in facilitating the activities of government in different sectors. The theory is apt for the study as the study attempts to analyse the role of government as an institution in the two regimes that made conscious and coordinated efforts to engineer the political economic environment of the country influencing economic growth, poverty , employment and other development indices that has to do with the political economy of the country. The theory provides the platform to explain the preferences in the two military regimes that produced outcomes that are important to be understudied in the political environment (Wells and Banaszak-Holl).Pinto (2017) in alignment with Banaszak-Holl and Wells (2017) they observe that institutional theory explore how social choices are shaped, mediated and channelled by the institutional environment.

Some of the assumptions of institutional economic theory include the argument that institutions shape economic outcomes; cost of exchange affect economic outcomes, specific investment create dependencies; and history matters in shaping economic development (North,1990;Wialliam,1985)

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Conceptual Framework

Political Economy

According to Vaseth and Balaam (2025) political economy is a branch of social science that studies the relationships between individuals and society and between markets and states. Though political economy is largely domiciled in political science it also draws diverse tools and methods from economics and sociology. They trace the origin of political economy to be derived from the Greek polis (meaning city) and oikonomos meaning 'one who manages a household or estate. In making his contribution on the concept of political economy Kenton (2025) observe that is a social science that focuses on the relationship between politics and economy as it examines how politics and the economy influence each other.

The roots of political economy dates back to the 18th century when scholars studied how wealth was distributed and administered between people. The term political economy before economics began to stated on its own as a result of further development of analytical tools to explain economic phenomenon from the 20th century. The term was associated with scholars such as Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Paganelli,2020).However the term the term is best ascribed to French writer and economist ,Antoine de Montchrestien who wrote "Traite de l'economie politique" in 1615.In his book, he examined the need for production and wealth to be distributed on an entirely larger scale – not in the household as Aristotle suggested by also examining how economics and politics are interrelated (Garnier,1858).

Political economy evolved as a response to the need to underscore the factors that were incidental to the sustenance of individuals in the society and wealth is generated and distributed to meet the needs of the society. The evolution of political economy as a field of enquiry is a direct response to the assertion of Aristotle that man is a political animal and of course every animal survives on the resources that are within his reach to sustain his life. Political economy is therefore a coordinated attempt to understand the wealth of societies and patterns of its distribution as it examines the relationship between the struggle for survival by individuals in the society and politics facilitated by the machinery of government (Vaseth and Balaam ,2025).

The study of political economy is important as it reveals how the economy affects politics and how politics also affects the economy. It provides a platform to analyse how power dynamics affect the economy of a country by attempting to illustrate how political parties come into and leave power and how this create ideological shifts in the economy of the country to reflect the character and philosophy of the party in power (Frieden,2020).

Nigeria's political economy is indicative of the interplay between politics and activities that create sustainable means of survival, distribution and acquisition of wealth for survival in the society. The political economy is reflective of the contextual definition of political economy as argued by Vaseth and Balaam (2025) political economy is a branch of social science that studies the relationships between individuals and society and between markets and states.

Economic Growth

Economic growth simply refers to the increase in the size of a country's economy over a period of time. Economic growth facilitates development in key sectors of the economy such as infrastructure, industries, employment and attraction of foreign direct investment. The economic growth of a country determines the level of its progress in the advancement of modern technology in addressing the challenges of modernisation and granting access to citizens to have a better national income on the general gross domestic tabulation of a country's GDP over a period of time. Lucas (1988) and George (1998) observe that economic growth is attributed to accumulation of human and physical capital and the increase in productivity and creation of new goods arising from technological innovation and division of labour which is fundamental to rising productivity.

Poverty Index

According to Hagenaars (1987) poverty index can be identified through a tabulation of the relative number of poor, indicating the incidence of poverty, the average income shortfall of the poor indicating their average deprivation and the distribution of income among the poor indicating their relative deprivation. Poverty index attempts to highlight the level of deprivation prevalent amongst citizens of a country. This study intends to make a comparison between the level of poverty amongst Nigerians in the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari (1979 – 1993) and the military regime of General Babangida (1985 – 1993) both of which occupied Nigeria's power space from 1979 to 1993 respectively. Alkire and Santos (2014) explain that poverty can be understood as a person's inability to meet minimum

international standards of living as stipulated by indicators related to the Millennium Development Goals. This assumption is presented in their Multi Dimensional Poverty (MPI) work which measures acute poverty for over 100 developing countries.

Poverty index is an important element in measuring the growth of any particular country as expounded by David Seers who in his exposition on the meaning of development emphasise that what is happening to inequality, poverty and unemployment are reflections of a country's level of economic progress (Ayodele,2022).

Economic Growth during the Civilian Administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari (1979 – 1983)

In this study Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will be used to do the comparative analysis of Nigeria's political economy in the period under study. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is an important yardstick in measuring the strength, health, growth and performance of an economy. According to Callen (2008) the GDP expresses the size of the economy and how it is performing. He argues that the growth rate of the GDP is often used as an indicator of the health of the economy as an increase in real GDP is interpreted as a sign that the economy is doing well.As growth in real GDP indicates that vital variables of the economy such as production , employment, and government revenue is experiencing favourable growth. However when the reverse is the case it means there is a slowdown in the variables that benefit from the growth of real GDP and this simply reflects negative growth indices in sectors of the economy (Gertner,2010;CFI,2025).The normal average expected growth rate for an economy annually is 2% - 3%.If the growth rate is above this level it means the economy is experiencing relative growth reflecting all the essential parameters of this growth such as generating employment, improvement in earning capacity of workers, rapid industrialisation and reduction in poverty levels. However when the growth rate is in the negative it means all the necessary parameters for measuring development in the economy are not growing (CFI, 2025).Below is the GDP table for Nigeria from 1980 – 1993.

Table 1 Gross Domestic Product of Nigeria 1980 - 1993

Year	Growth Rate %	Remark
1980	4.2	
1981	-13.1	

1982	-6.8	
1983	-10.9	
1984	-1.1	
1985	5.9	
1986	0.06	
1987	3.2	
1988	7.3	
1989	1.9	
1990	11.7	
1991	0.4	
1992	4.6	
1993	2.0	

Source: World Bank (Table drawn by author)

Economic Growth Index of Nigeria during the Civilian Administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari (1979 -1983)

Table 2 Gross Domestic Product of Nigeria (1980 – 1983)

Year	**GDP Growth Rate %**	
1980	**4.2**	
1981	**-13.1**	
1982	**-6.8**	
1983	**-10.9**	
Average Growth (1980 – 1983)	**-6.65**	

Source: World Bank (Table is authors design)

Table 2 above shows that in 1980 there was a GDP growth rate of 4.2% which reflects a positive economic growth. In 1981 there was a GDP growth rate of -13.1% which was a negative growth and reflects a decline in economic growth of the country. In 1982 there was a GDP growth rate of -6.8% which was still a negative growth even though an improvement compared with the margin of 1982.In 1983 the GDP growth rate was -10.9% representing a negative growth for the economy. The average GDP growth rate for 1980 – 1983 was -6.65% reflecting that for three years consecutively the economy faced the challenge of decline.

Economic Growth Index of Nigeria during the Military Regime of General Babangida (1985 – 1993)

Table 3 Gross Domestic Product of Nigeria (1985 -1993)

Year	GDP Growth Rate %	
1985	5.9	
1986	0.06	
1987	3.2	
1988	7.3	
1989	1.9	
1990	11.7	
1991	0.4	
1992	4.6	
1993	-2.0	
Average GDP Growth Rate (1980 – 1993)	3.8	

Source: World Bank (2025) (Table is author's discretion)

Table 3 shows that in 1985 there was a GDP growth rate of 5.9 % representing a positive growth in the economy. In 1986, the GDP was 0.06 which represented an insignificant growth for the country and a decline compared to the growth rate of 5.9% in 1985.In 1987 there was a GDP growth of 3.2% representing a normal growth for the economy. In 1988 the economy achieved a GDP growth rate of 7.3 which was a positive improvement on the growth level of 1987.In 1989 the GDP growth rate was 1.9% a decline from the growth rate of 7.3% in 1988.In 1990 the GDP growth rate was 11.7% great improvement on the growth rate of 1989.In 1991 the GDP growth rate was 0.4% a serious decline from the heights that was achieved in 1990.In 1992 the GDP growth rate was 4.6% a substantial improvement on the 0.4% of 1991 while the GDP growth rate for 1992 was 2.0 ,though within normal acceptable average for growth but less than the growth rate of 1991.On the whole in the nine years under review the average GDP was 3.8% signifying an average economic growth over the period under review even though SAP – Structural Adjustment Programme was adopted by the

government to tele-guide its economic policies. It is important to note that in the period under review the annual growth of the economy experienced serious back and forth as growth rate even though it occurred experienced serious fluctuations.

Poverty Levels

According to Ugheoke (2025) observes that poverty increased in Nigeria from 12% to 13.6% between 1985 – 1993.The naira was devalued from N2/$ to N22/$ in an attempt to allow forces of demand and supply to determine the price of the naira and this increased the level of income poverty. World Bank (1999) defines poverty in a number of phrases which include poverty as hunger; lack of shelter; being sick; not being able to go to school and illiterate; not being able to speak properly; not having a job; fear for the future; losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water; powerlessness; lack of representation and freedoms. This definition by the World Bank captures the facts of poverty. These facts make poverty detrimental to the growth and development of the political economy of any country.

There are certain standard indices that are used to measure the poverty level of a country. Some of these standard instrument include access to food, portable drinking water , health facilities , and income above the poverty line. United Nations Human Development Index (1997,1998) identify three major components in measuring poverty index include and these include: (i) life expectancy at birth; (longevity); (ii) education attainment and; (iii) improved standard of living determined by per capita income. These components of measuring poverty index reflects the meticulous process that is involved in assessing the poverty levels of any given country. In agreement with the above, Foster, Greer and Thorbecke (1984) similarly identifies the following as instruments for measuring the rate of poverty in a country (i) the head count poverty index given by the percentage of the population that live in the household with a consumption per capita less than the poverty line; (ii) poverty gap index which reflects the depth of poverty by taking into account how far the average poor person's income is from the poverty line; and (iii) the distributionally sensitive measure of squared poverty gap defined as the mean of the squared proportionate poverty gap which reflects the severity of poverty. They identify income levels of individuals in comparison to national income levels that constitute what is defined as living below poverty line usually derived from internationally acceptable standards. Below is a table showing estimated total population and poverty rates in Nigeria from 1980 – 1993.

Table 4 Estimated Total Population and Poverty Levels in Nigeria (1980 – 1993)

Year	Estimated Total Population in Millions	Absolute No. of Poor People (in millions)	Percentage (%) that are poor
1980	64.6	18.1	28.1
1981	66.7	21,3	32
1982	68,4	24.2	35.5
1983	70.6	27.5	39
1984	73	31.4	43
1985	75.4	34.9	46.3
1986	77.9	35.8	46
1987	80.4	36,5	45.4
1988	83.1	37.4	45
1989	84.9	37.7	44.5
1990	86.6	38	44
1991	88.5	38.5	43.5
1992	91.3	39	42.7
1993	93.5	45.8	49

Source: World Bank (1999). Note:(Table is the discretion of the author)

Poverty Levels in the Civilian Administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari 1980 – 1983

Table 5 Poverty rate in Nigeria (1980 – 1983)

Year	Estimated Total Population in Millions	Absolute No. of Poor People (in millions)	Percentage (%) that are poor
1980	64.6	18.1	28.1
1981	66.7	21,3	32

1982	68,4	24.2	35.5
1983	70.6	27.5	39
Average Percentage that are poor (1980 – 1983)			**33.65**

Source: World Bank (1999) (Table is author's discretion)

Table 5 above shows that out of an estimated population of 64.6 million, 18.1 million Nigerians were living in poverty representing 28.1% of the population. In 1981 out of an estimated population of 66.7 million, 21,3 million Nigerians were living in absolute poverty representing 32% of the population. In 1982 out of an estimated population of 68.4 million ,24.2 million were living in absolute poverty representing 35.5%.In 1983 out of an estimated population of 70.6 million 27.5 million were living in absolute poverty representing 39% of the population. The average percentage of Nigerians living in poverty between 1980 – 1983 was 33.7% approximately.

Poverty Levels in Nigeria during the Military Regime of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (1985 – 1993)

Table 6 Estimated Total Population and Poverty Rate in Nigeria (1985 – 1993)

Year	Estimated total population (in millions)	Absolute no. of poor people (in millions)	Percentage (%) that are poor	
1985	75.4	34.9	46.3	
1986	77.9	35.8	46	
1987	80.4	36.5	45.4	
1988	83.1	37.4	45	
1989	84.9	37.7	44.5	
1990	86.6	38	44	
1991	88.5	38.5	43.5	
1992	91.3	39	42.7	
1993	93.5	45.8	49	
Average Percentage of poor (1985 –			45	

1993)				

Source: World Bank (1999) (Table is author's discretion)

Table 6 above shows that in 1985 out of an estimated total population of 75.4 million 34.9% of Nigerians were living in poverty representing 46.3% of the total population. In 1986 out of an estimated population of 77.9 million 35,8million Nigerians were living in poverty representing 46% of the population. In 1987 out an estimated population of 80.4 million, 36.5 million were living in absolute poverty representing 45.4% of the total population. In 1989 out of a population of 84.9 million, 37.7 million were living in absolute poverty representing 44.5%.In 1990 out of a population of 86.6 million, 38million were living in absolute poverty representing 44% of the total population. In 1991 out of an estimated population of 88.5 million,38.5 million were living in absolute poverty representing 43.5% of the total population. In 1992 out of an estimated population of 91.3 million , 39 million were living in poverty representing 42.7%.In 1993 out of a population of 93.5 million 45.8 million were living in absolute poverty representing 49% of the total population. From the table it would be observed that although there was reduction in the percentage of poor citizens from 1985 to 1992 but the reduction was too insignificant to reduce the number of citizens who were falling into poverty in comparison to the total population. Irrespective of the very marginal reduction in percentage of poor citizens in comparison to the population the number of poor citizens who are poor kept increasing until it got to its peak in 1993 with almost half of the population of the entire country experiencing poverty. The average poverty for the period under study 1985 – 1993 arrived at 45%.

Unemployment Rate in Nigeria 1980 - 1993

Employment determines the income level that is used to assess the income differentials that indicates the strength of the economy. Employment levels determine poverty levels and the standard of living that is used to assess the general strength of the GDP of a country. Unemployment rate in the economy reflects the level of productivity that is taking place in that economy and its size (Lucas (1988) and George (1998).Unemployment therefore is a useful tool in measuring the performance of the economy under any administration as it determines whether a substantial size of the population is impoverished or not.

Table 7 Unemployment rate in Nigeria (1980 – 1993)

Year	Unemployment Rate (%)
1980	6.4
1981	5.2
1982	4.3
1983	6.4
1984	6.2
1985	6.1
1986	5.3
1987	7
1988	5.1
1989	4.5
1990	3.5
1991	3.1
1992	3.5
1993	3.4

Source: World Bank (2025); CBN (1996) (Table is author's discretion)

Table 8 Unemployment Rate in during Shagari's Administration Nigeria 1980 – 1985

Year	Unemployment Rate (%)
1980	6.4
1981	5.2
1982	4.3
1983	6.4
Average Unemployment rates between 1980 – 1985	5.6% approximately

Source: World Bank Open Data (2025) (Table is author's discretion)

The Table above shows that in 1980 the unemployment rate in the country was 6.4%.In 1981 the unemployment rate was 5.2%.In 1982 the unemployment rate was 4.3%.While in 1983 the unemployment rate was 6.4%.The table shows that there was an improvement on the unemployment rate in 1981 and 1982 but in 1983 there was a hike in the unemployment rate in the country. The average unemployment in the tenure of the administration was 5.6%.

Table 9 Unemployment Rate during the Military Regime of General Babangida 1985 – 1993

Year	Unemployment Rate %
1985	6.1
1986	5.3
1987	7
1988	5.1
1989	4.5
1990	3.5
1991	3.1
1992	3.5
1993	3.4
Average Unemployment rate (1985 – 1993)	4.6

Source:World Bank Open Data (2025) (Table is author's discretion)

Table 8 above shows that in 1985 there unemployment rate was 6.1%;in 1986 the unemployment rate was 5.3% an improvement in on 1986;in 1987 the unemployment rate was 7% a decline on 1986 rate; in 1988 the unemployment rate was 5.1% an improvement on 1987 rate; in 1989 the unemployment rate was 4.5% a decline on the 1988 rate; in 1990 the unemployment rate was 3.5% an improvement on the 1989 rate; in 1991 the unemployment rate was 3.1% a slight improvement on 1990;in 1992 the unemployment rate was 3.5 % a decline on the 1991 rate; and in 1993 the unemployment rate was 3.4% a very slight improvement on 1992 rate.The average unemployment rate for the period was 4.6%.The unemployment rates within the period experienced instability as it grows marginally at times and declines in the next year. The annual growth rate in employment was therefore relatively unstable.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that the average growth in the period under review (1980 – 1983) during the civilian administration of President Shagari stood at a negative of -6.7% while that of the military regime of General Babandida in the period under review (1985 – 1993) stood at 3.8%.By implication it means the country experienced more economic growth during the

military administration of General Babangida compared to that of the civilian administration of President Shagari.

In addition the study revealed that the average percentage of poor citizens was 33.5% of the total population during the civilian administration of President Shagari and 45% of the population during the military regime of General Babangida. This indicate that a greater number of Nigerians fell into poverty during the military regime of General Babangida perhaps due to the introduction of the Structural adjustment programme SAP by the government. This is in agreement with Aikoye (1994) and Faruqee (1994) who observe some of the reasons for persistent poverty in Nigeria and its attendant consequences such as increase in unemployment is attributable to the negative effects of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in 1986, political instability, bad governance, corruption, and the collapse of public infrastructures.

Furthermore the study revealed that the average unemployment rate in the country for the period under review (1980 -1985) during the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari was 5.6% approximately even though the percentage of poor citizens was lower than that of the General Babangida administration. The unemployment rate under General Babangida's regime was 4.6% in the period under review. It means there was more employment during the General Bangida military regime even though the numbers of poor Nigerians were more during his administration (World Bank, 1999; CBN, 1996)

Conclusion

The study shows that that military government of General Babangida (1985 – 1993) managed the economy better in spite of the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) than the civilian administration of President Shehu Shagari (1979 – 1983). This would have been contestable but for the facts and figures that has been provided on the growth of the country's GDP in each of the administrations. However, even though there was more economic growth by GDP and more employment during the military administration of General Babangida the rate of poverty was higher in his administration than in the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari. This scenario leaves unresolved questions for further studies as it is controversial how economic growth by GDP did not translate to improvement in the standard and quality of lives of the citizens. The study concludes by emphasising that civil democracies should be protected and not allowed to collapse as they initiate policies that address poverty amongst the citizens better than civilians as demonstrated by the democratic and civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari in Nigeria. Civilian democracies should

be allowed to survive the tides and implement interventions in the political economy of their countries that would improve the lives of the citizens.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following are thus recommended:

i. Governments should articulate a careful vision to develop the country economically specifically addressing poverty and unemployment;

ii. Economic growth should reflect reduction in poverty levels amongst citizens. Economic growth that does not reduce the number of poor citizens is controversial and debateable therefore government should ensure that economic growth translate to poverty reduction for the citizens; and

iii. Reduction in the number of unemployed citizens should naturally mean reduction in the number of poor citizens. When reduction in unemployment rate does not correspond to reduction in the number of poor citizens then it means the workers are literally underemployed.Government should institute a national minimum wage policy that ensures that all categories of workers irrespective of whether they are in the private sector or public sector enjoy a minimum wage that is above the poverty line.

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